

## New Freedom for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

It was August of 1990, and I was barely four years old. My mom had told me that she was going to take me to a party being held at a local park. All I heard was "party," and I could hardly wait. Since I had just had a birthday, I knew parties were a big deal and I was excited about the cake, the presents, the games, the fun -- the whole works. In the middle of a table under a pavilion sat a huge cake, but it had no candles. There were lots of people, but nobody brought any presents. Nobody was playing any games, but there were people from a radio station and a television station talking to some of the partygoers. There were enough balloons and streamers to suggest that somebody in the group was having a birthday. I just could not figure out who it was. And, as it turned out, it was nobody. The party was not a birthday party after all. It was a celebration of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, 1990. I had no idea what that was or why it would call for a celebration. More than twelve years later, I do understand it. I also understand that the party might have happened too soon.

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the population of individuals with disabilities has continued to grow. Now, fully twenty percent of the population of the United States is affected by a disability. This means that more than fifty-four million Americans are living with a disability, and almost half of them have disabilities significant and severe enough to affect their ability to see, walk, hear, and perform the functions of everyday life. While the Americans with Disabilities Act paved the way for better access to employment, public and commercial buildings, housing, and telecommunications, there is much work to be done. Americans who have disabilities have not enjoyed the benefits of full participation in American society and that should be corrected. To draw attention to and help alleviate this problem, President Bush announced the New Freedom Initiative on February 1, 2001.

People who have disabilities face a number of obstacles, and those obstacles seem to have remained constant, regardless of legislation or awareness programs. One of those obstacles is that Americans with disabilities have a lower educational level than those without disabilities. The number of adult Americans with disabilities who do not have a high school education is double the number of adult Americans without disabilities who have not graduated from high school. For those individuals in school, only twenty-seven percent of the students receiving special education services actually graduate, while seventy-five percent of the students who do not receive special education attain high school graduation.

Another significant obstacle is that Americans with disabilities have a lower income and are less likely to be employed than those who do not have a disability. Therefore, those who have disabilities have a socioeconomic disadvantage. The unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities has remained at around seventy percent for at least the past decade. Over a third of people with disabilities live in households with annual incomes of less than \$15,000, compared to only about twelve percent for those who do not have disabilities. Fewer than ten percent of people with disabilities own their own homes; however, about seventy percent of people without disabilities own their own homes. Those who have disabilities vote in elections at a rate twenty percent less than those who do not have disabilities. These discrepancies do not exist because the individuals who have disabilities have less desire to have an education, work, own homes, and participate in all the activities of citizenship. The discrepancies exist because the effort it would take to include all people -- whether they have a disability or not - in American life has not been seriously undertaken until now.

The New Freedom Initiative is designed to increase access to technology that is often too expensive to acquire, no matter how good the technology or how helpful it would be. It will

expand educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities by increasing funding for special education and creating an incentive for every child to learn to read. New Freedom for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century -- the New Freedom Initiative -- promotes ownership of homes for people with disabilities, helping individuals build their net worth, making financing other purchases easier. It promotes integrating those who have disabilities in the workforce by allowing people with disabilities to choose the support services they might need and making access to computers more realistic for people with disabilities. While about two-thirds of the adult population without disabilities owns a computer, only a fourth of those who have a disability actually own a computer and only twenty percent have access to the Internet as compared with forty percent of other adults.

All my life I have known people who have significant disabilities. I have grown up going places where people used wheelchairs, breathed with ventilators, communicated through sign language, and had guide dogs. Many of those same people have families, go out to eat, work for a living, own their own businesses, complain about taxes and high prices, drive cars, make mistakes, and enjoy going places and doing things just like I do. Some of them, however, do not have the opportunity. People who have disabilities want to be citizens of the community in which they live and enjoy all the rights and privileges that come with being an American. America is a country of great wealth and opportunity, but it is not so wealthy or so fortunate that it can ignore the creativity and contributions of a large segment of its population. The New Freedom Initiative brings a renewed promise for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a commitment to make good on the promise of equality, allowing those who have disabilities the opportunity to learn, grow, work, choose a place to live, and be an active part of the community.